

## Geometry in the colossal: the project of metaphysical globalization

Peter Sloterdijk

From *Sphären II—Globen* (Suhrkamp, 1999) pp 47–72

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**Abstract.** “Geometry in the colossal” (*Geometrie in Ungeheurem*) appears as pages 47–72 of the second volume of Peter Sloterdijk’s *Sphären*—the volume is entitled *Globen*, ‘Globes’. The excerpt is a beginning of the history of the idea of the sphere or the globe. As claimed by Heidegger in the epigraph, the conquest of the world as picture is the fundamental event of modernity. The historical question that arises, then, is that of the rise of the globe as the fundamental picture of the world. Sloterdijk begins with remarks on what he calls a “treatise on the metaphysics of roundness”, Nicholas of Cusa’s *De Ludo Globi*, set in a discussion concerning the movement of the notion of the globe from the Greek to the Roman world. The second half of the excerpt is devoted to a more focused analysis of the composition, history, and significance of the Farnese Atlas. In this work we see the world portrayed as a “poetic–scientific bastard heaven, a product of geometry as much as of mythology”, borne upon the shoulders of a titan–philosopher–athlete, images at once ancient and modern. The conquest of the world as picture thus transforms Atlas’s punishment into a symbol of the greatest earthly power.

“The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture.”

Martin Heidegger *The Age of the World Picture* (2002 [1938])

### I. The Atlas

If one were to express, with a single word, the chief motif of European thought in its metaphysical age, it could only be ‘globalization’. The affair of Western reason with the totality of the world is created and unfolds in the symbol of the geometrically perfected round form, which we still signify with the Greek ‘sphere’, or more frequently with the Latin ‘globe’. It was the early European metaphysicians, mathematicians, and cosmologists who forced their new, fatalistic definition on the mortals: they would be creatures who inhabited and administered a sphere. Globalization begins as a geometricization of the immeasurable.

Through this process that comprises the centerpiece of Greek *theoria*, the question of the position of humans in nature takes on a radical technical significance. Humans—and they alone insofar as they conceive of the form of the sphere—place themselves in an intelligible, formal, and constructive relation to the totality of the world.

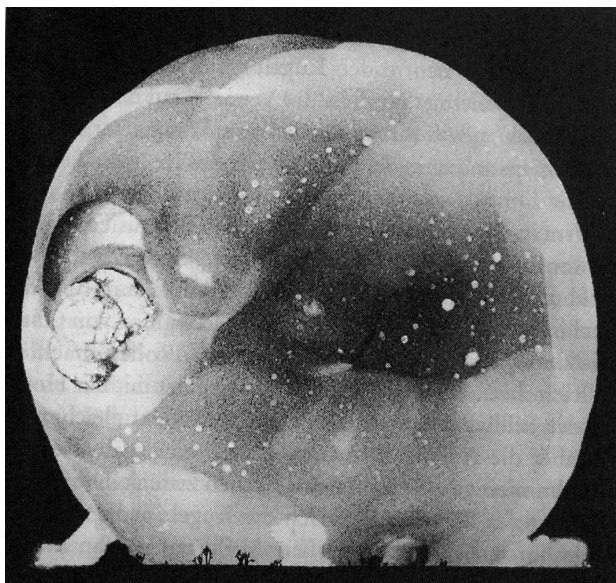
To have a place in nature now means, according to the meeting of being and the circle, to occupy a position in a great sphere, whether centrally or peripherally. Alongside the representation of the sphere begins the production of the sphere; on the strength of this development begins the graphic and technical play, with the totality and its picture pursued by geometrically enlightened Europeans from the high classical period onwards. “For no beast”, as Nicholas of Cusa would say in his hyperlucid treatise on the metaphysics of roundness, *De Ludo Globi*, “makes a bowling-ball” (2000),<sup>(1)</sup> and certainly no animal can play with or aim a ball.

<sup>(1)</sup> “Nulla enim bestia globum et eius motus ad terminum producit” (I:3.9).

Globalization or *sphereopoiese* in general is the fundamental event of European thought, one that has not ceased to provoke revolutions in the thought and life relations of humans for two and a half thousand years. What today appears as a blunt geopolitical fact in a phase of greater concentration (and more nervous interpretation), in the beginning was a compulsory figure of thought only for philosophers and cosmologists. Mathematical globalization proceeds terrestrial globalization by more than two thousand years.

“We recognize ... truly we recognize! That must be known and felt again. And the spirit that bears and develops this recognition must be defended against spiritlessness and death” (Bense, 1999, page 122).

This cry of the young Max Bense—in a writing from the year 1935, which bears the ideo-political title *The Rise of Spirit: A Defense of Recognition*—can be read today as if he had wanted to posit an axiom for an intellectual ethic of globalization. Globalization can be understood only by those who open their perspective to the ontological,



*Sphären II* page 49. Test detonation of a hydrogen bomb in Nevada, beginning of the 1950s, taken from a distance of 32 km.

technical, and political seriousness of the figure of thought of the globe. To think means to play a role in the history of this seriousness. This serious history is the history of being. Accordingly, being is not simply some time or another—certainly not the existential time until death—but the time it takes to grasp what space is: the most real globe.

With the breakthrough to the concept of the truly existing sphere, confused human history—as we must call the epoch of reality lost in the unclear fibers of time—ends and the transition is made to posthistory, the state in which space absorbs time. After histories: the simultaneous world. For those who recognize this, the sphere has vanquished the line; the peace of being has vanquished the fidgeting of becoming. Posthistory is therefore as old as the philosophical theory of the sphere. Today this expression signifies the effort to copy onto the earth what Plato had already etched in the celestial sphere: relaxation in the apocalypse of space.

Therefore, the starting date of the original globalization can be determined, at least as an epoch, with some clarity: it is the cosmological enlightenment of the Greek thinkers who, combining ontology with geometry, brought the great sphere into play. Perhaps Heidegger was right to equate modernity with the high point of the picturing of the world and beings, but the beginnings of this event reach back to the culminating thought of the Greeks. The representation of the world with the globe is the decisive deed of the early European enlightenment. It can be said definitively that originary philosophy was the radical change to monospherical thought—the demand that entities in general be interpreted through the formal idea of the sphere. With this formalizing gesture, thinking individuals were bound to a strong relationship with the center of their existence and sworn to the unity, totality, and roundness of existence. From this proceeds the geometry of ethics and aesthetics: first comes the sphere, then morality. In making the rule of the construction of the sphere explicit and conceiving of the ideal periphery on which every point is equidistant from the center, the early mathematicians placed an instrument of unheard-of rationality in the hands of the world-picture-creating energies of the Westerners. From now on humans can and must locate themselves in an encompassing zone, the *periéchon*. This zone is no longer a castle or a vegetative grotto, a hearth or cult commune, dancing in a circle, but a logical and cosmological construction form of timeless validity. Each intelligence is now forced to scrutinize its position with respect to the middle point: Are we near the center of being and do we enjoy from there its panoramic vistas? Or is it rather our distance from the middle that allows us to clarify where and who we are? Are we contained within the circle or are we excluded from it? Are we related to the middle or are we estranged from it? As soon as the absolute sphere had raised the totality of all beings into its representation, philosophers were permitted to lay the charge on ordinary mortals that those who did not see the things outside of the sphere were blind. And, since they were unable to count to one, they were powerless to truly think.

It was not the evil pedantry of the eternal pedagogue that moved the first European thinker of the all-one, Parmenides, to distinguish the way of truth from that of opinion; it was the sharp insight into the unanimous ‘structure’ of the all-round that forced him to acknowledge the difference between those who had lifted their gaze to the beautifully rounded unity and those who remained lost in the surrounding multiplicity. The simplest geometrical form climbed to the rank of an absolutely valid ideal according to which, for an age of the world, the unevenness of life and the fissures of the world must be measured. The pure sphere created by thinking-as-circumspection-on-the-unified became a critique of empirical, unperfected, unround reality. Where there were merely surroundings, the sphere must come into being—with this, imperative geometry is translated into the ethical field. This imperative grants wings for the jump to the whole of the soul. With it, the transfer becomes ontologically serious. The totality of beings is now interpreted under the sign of spatiality, sense, and soul: The project of the world-soul has entered its stage of precision. The mortals are invited to step out of their hopeless path through time, where they weave away their lives in the threads of worry; they have the chance to look away from the trough of worry and at the same time come out into a great, befriended space, where everything is simultaneous, well lit, and open. Since the sensible—supersensible figure of the sphere was chosen as the archetype of perfect beauty from the beginning of philosophical-cosmological thought, it has stamped into the *conditio humana* the form of a game that sustains, empowers, and surpasses its player. Whoever plays with balls happens upon an overly great, overly beautiful, overly round sphere that must, if the seriousness of thought hangs over the game, bowl over its player. Would it thus be geometry that is nothing but a terrible beginning?

There is not much to see of this great turn towards the timelessly round in the tradition of images from the quotidian culture of the ancient world. From the Greek dawning of the sphere, besides the discursive treatments in philosophical texts from Anaximander to Plato, there are only two-dimensional figurative witnesses of *sphaira*, flat and thoroughly conventional. Besides works in the manner of the philosophical mosaics of Torre Annunziata, there are for the most part representations on coins,



*Sphären II* page 53. *Sphaira* under the foot of the emperor.

in whose representational program the *sphaira* plays a notable role together with portraits of rulers and imperial insignia. Thus, one can recognize on ancient coinage the picture of the goddess Nike writing a report of a victory on a round shield floating in front of her as she places her foot on a sphere lying on the ground. This habitus was adopted by the later emperors—the *sphaira* under the sandals of the ruler became a common conceit of the pictorial language of power. The philosopher Anaxagoras is represented seated on a sphere in a coin from an earlier period, just like the form of Italia; a small Hellenistic cameo even shows an Eros enthroned on a sphere. With the Romans, it is the goddess Fortuna who places her light foot on the sphere. The image of the sphere reaches a level of pure cliché when it is presented laconically together with a rudder—enough to put before the eyes of the educated the coupling of state cybernetics and cosmic piety. On Caesar's coins, sphere, fasces, and Mercury's staff are readily brought together into an insigne complex, as if to postulate in a stenogram the unity of total rule and world happiness. As one researcher appropriately remarked, from Hellenistic time onwards, the *sphaira* was a common "hieroglyph for the entire universe, especially the heavens" (Brendel, 1977, page 78); under the Roman emperors the association of the sphere and the portrait of the ruler developed into an obligatory motif for whomever wanted to achieve or announce power. The equivalence of the symbol of the sphere and the rule of the king was taken further in sacramental elevation with the Christianized rulers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages as the *sphaira* transformed itself into the sovereign *globus cruciger*, an orb underneath the cross. And if, since the 19th century, the image of the earth globe got the better of the cosmic sphere, the earth emancipated from the heavens still profits from the meaning of totality of the classical sphere.

It can occur to contemporary media theorists that the image of the sphere on the old coins consists of a double circularity:

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*Sphären II* page 55. The world sphere under the foot of St Francis of Assisi; Murillo, *St Francis Embracing the Crucified Christ*, detail.

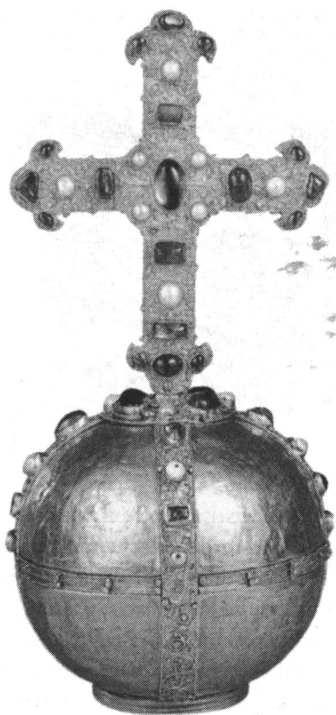
It is stamped on objects which themselves are already agents and media of something of a relative globalization in the economic sense—as Roman coins were, in their time, in circulation in the entire *inhabited world*. The imago of the cosmos on the coin is part of a pictorial history that flows not into art, but into the political and technical seizure of power. Even if the coins of Hellenic antiquity only circulated in the Roman *ecumene*, the same dynamic was already at work in their movement as that which is to be seen from the beginning of modernity over the entire earthly ball. Gold and globe belong together insofar as the typical movement of money—*return of investment*—incorporates the principle of circumnavigating the world. Pictures of spheres on coins: Conceived from the point of view of the result, the program of European world and media history appears in these unspectacular ancient cultural relics. In the modern age, money, as real and speculative capital, places humans under the rule of the absolute law of commerce. What rules the cycle collects the whole. At the end of this development we will show why the fundamental thought of modernity was articulated *not* by Copernicus, but rather by Magellan. The fundamental fact of modernity is not that the earth orbits the sun, but rather that money circumnavigates the earth. The theory of the sphere is, at the same time, the first analysis of power.

Thus, in antiquity, as soon as the form of the sphere could be constructed in geometrical abstraction and gazed upon in cosmological contemplation, there arose forcefully the question of who should rule over the represented and produced sphere. In the older pictures, goddesses of victory, fortunes, imperators, and later *missionare Christi* had placed their foot upon the sphere. Scientists collected their instruments around themselves to trace out tropics and meridians, to draw the equator. Early on, the Catholic church placed the cross atop the sphere and proclaimed Christ the cosmocrat and lord of all the spheres. Finally, in the 20th century the globe

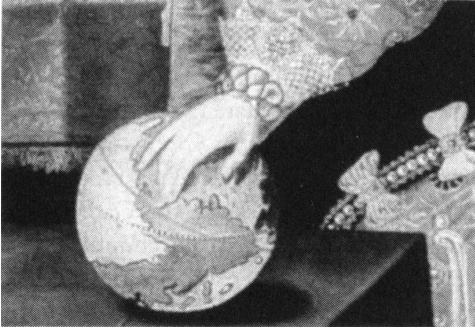
was integrated in the logos and advertisements of innumerable worldwide enterprises. Power and spirit share their common sign in the globe, even if, in the age of regional high cultures, the two were brought together in a suspicious, antagonistic cooperation, placed opposite one another like irreconcilable opposites.

When the Romans looted the magnificent sphere from the house of Archimedes during the siege of Syracuse, General Marcellus sent it to Rome to be placed in the temple of the *Virtus*—we would do best to translate her name as the goddess of ‘motivation’. What Archimedes said to the Roman soldiers who slayed him—“Don’t destroy my circle!”—was immediately understood by the leaders of the republic in their own way and later by the emperors. After all, how could the rulers make heads or tails of their speeches about the construction of the Roman empire if they did not understand it as the attempt to beat out with legions a larger and better defended circle around the capital chosen by the gods, and then to make sure it was not destroyed?

The picture of the great sphere thus calls forth the question of the position of the middle and, subsequently, that of the identity and residence of



*Sphären II* page 58. Hohenstaufen globus cruciger.



*Sphären II* page 59. The hand of Elizabeth I of England on the globe.

the ruler of the whole; at the same time, it forces pictorial, representational thinking to offer a solution to whether the all-encompassing sphere itself can be *placed* on a support or a foundation. On what fundament should the All—pictorially, conceptually, actually—be brought to stand? In what mantle, in what container—in representation and in reality—should the sphere of all spheres be embedded? Who or what should bear that which bears all? Or should we permit the rash thought that the container contains itself and *floats*

by its absolute power without external support?<sup>(2)</sup>

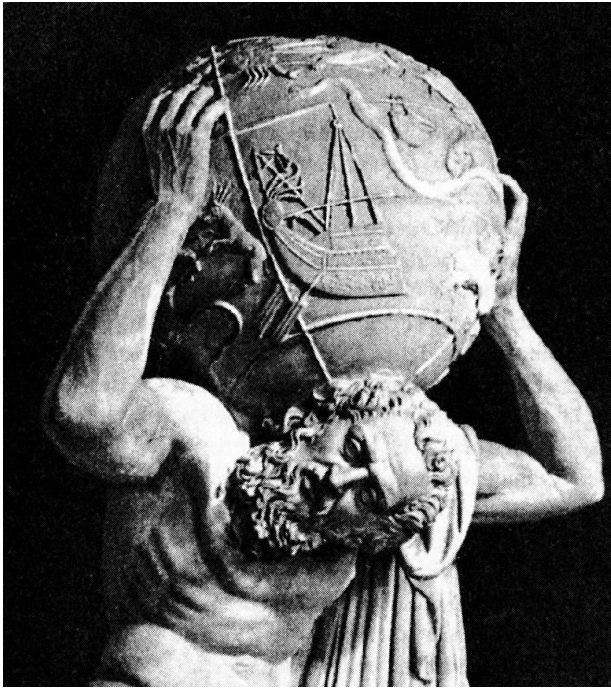
In the face of the dilemma towards which this question points, there came to the assistance of ancient thinkers and artists the metaphysical tradition that suggests a Titanic candidate for the role of cosmos bearer. It was this myth that served as godfather to the most powerful globe statue of the ancient world, insofar as it was with its help that such a clear and pregnant answer could be found to the question of the pedestal and bearer of the entirety, in what was one of the most fruitful moments of ancient picture creation.

In the year 1575—under the pontificate of Gregory XIII—grave diggers in Rome struck upon the fragments of a monumental statue that were identified without difficulty as being of the heavenly sphere-bearing Atlas. After substantial restoration, the sensational find was incorporated into the antiquities collection of the Farnese house. Together with the other pieces of the family's collection, in the 18th century it passed into the possession of Charles IV of Naples, the son of Philip V of Spain and Elizabeth Farnese.<sup>(3)</sup> Thus, the piece finds itself today in the Museo Nazionale in Naples even though, given its spirit and manner of fabrication, it can be at home nowhere else than in the Rome of the Caesars, and indirectly that of the Popes.<sup>(4)</sup>

<sup>(2)</sup> The discoverer of this question—we will call it that of absolute localization—appears to have been Aristotle, who formulated the question in his *Physics* in the terms of an enumeration of eight variations of the meaning of the preposition 'in' (*en*): whether everything either was in another or nowhere or whether it might also be possible for something to be *in itself* ["There lies in existence an essential tendency towards proximity" (*Sphären I*, Exkurs 4, page 341 n. 144)]. With this announcement of the possibility of being-in-itself, Aristotle touches on the problematic of the unwritten great book of Western philosophy, which would have had to have been called *Being and Space*.

<sup>(3)</sup> Charles III of Spain (1716–88) was the son of Elisabeth of Parma (Elizabeth Farnese) and Philip V of Spain. Charles III was King of Naples and Sicily (as Carlo VII) (1735–59) and King of Spain (as Carlos III de Borbón) (1759–88). When Charles ascended to the Spanish throne, he was required by treaty to give up the kingship of Naples and Sicily. His oldest son, Felipe Antonio, was mentally ill and therefore ineligible for succession. Charles's second son was heir to the Spanish throne and eventually became Charles IV of Spain (1788–1808). Charles III's third son therefore became Ferdinand I of the Two Sicilies (1759–1825). All three of these were the children of Charles III of Spain and Maria Amalia of Saxony. There was, therefore, never a Charles IV of Naples (translator's note).

<sup>(4)</sup> In the literature, there are indecisive attempts to date the work: Alois Fauser declares the Atlante Farnese to be a work of the first century *before* Christ (1967, page 39); then, for Percy Ernst Schramm (1958, page 8), it is a work of the first century *after* Christ; occasionally, there is also talk of the time of Antonius Pius (the middle of the 2nd century); the most convincing authors restrict the date to the time of the principate of Augustus. Franz Boll (cited in Pauly-Wissowa, 1981, page 1429) claims to be able to conclude that the globe was made in the years following the rise



*Sphären II* page 61. Celestial sphere on the shoulders of the Farnese Atlas, 1st century CE, Museo Nazionale, Naples.

In its stocky pathos and its immanent monumentality—the work is nearly 2 m high—the Farnese Atlas can strike the inexperienced observer as a call from the sacred beginnings of thought and art. The oldest globe in the world appears in this work, almost the only one that survived from ancient times.

Archimedes's globe of the heavens from the 3rd century BCE, testified to in the literary record, is missing, as is the great terrestrial globe of Crates of Mallos from the 2nd century BCE (Schramm, 1958, page 11). Taking this into account, this unique objet d'art can awaken nearly noumenal intuitions. This Atlas—with its bearded, patient, Titanic head, tilted to one side in suffering, laden with the weight of the world, athlete and thinker in one person—can at first appear as a saying of the Presocratics turned into stone: a reminder of a time in which humans and Titans could understand each other. In its subdued anguish and formalized endurance, this powerful, human form of Atlas seems to whisper to its observer the dogma that existence means bearing the weight of the heavens.

At second glance, the archaic aura of the work dissolves completely. As the investigation delves deeper, it becomes evident how much the picture has impressed its traces on late imperial thought and scientific concepts. This sphere-bearing Atlas in fact does not represent at all a document of a mythical past time, in two regards.

In the first place, the ball on his shoulders and between his hands is no longer the old Homeric or Hesiodic heaven whose bearer the Titan of the myth was ordered to be by Zeus as punishment for his participation in the insurgency of the earthly, old gods against the Olympians. In fact, the old Homeric *uranós* can be represented not as a

(4) continued)

of Augustus to sole power from the presence of a constellation of a throne. Franz Boll (1899, page 121f.) claims to be able to conclude, from the presence of a constellation of a throne, that the globe was made in the years following the rise of Augustus to sole power.

sphaira, but rather only as a hemisphere over the flat Earth—a version that corresponds to the intuitive, pretheoretical view of the world at its earliest. Doubtless it was obvious to the older image to prevent the collapse of a corporeal, hemispherical heaven onto the earth with a real counterforce—thus, the heavens are represented in some ancient accounts as held up by columns, in analogy to the support of the framework of a temple by a colonnade. Old Peloponnesian sagas use the summits of mountains as columns for the heavens, so that there is here expressed an insightful mythological ground for the separation between Earth and Heaven.

On the other hand, it is a testament to the triumph of the Greek enlightenment that the modern, mathematical full sphere is loaded upon the archaic, Titanic form. What Atlas bears on his shoulders is precisely the heaven of the philosophers, synonymous with the world as a whole or the cosmos since Plato and Aristotle. The geometric modernity of the ideal, spherical form—highlighted by the network of the equator, the tropics, and the colures—is bound with the prescientific heaven poetry of ancient times that had painted the complete catalog of the constellations on the vase of the nocturnal world. The images are wrought in *alto-relievo*, as if the nocturnal constellations were seen not from Earth, but from a position somewhere beyond earthly nights. Of the forty-eight canonical constellations of the ancient world, twenty four are clearly recognizable on the Farnese Atlas.

Thus, what the Titan bears upon his shoulders represents a poetic–scientific bastard heaven, a product of geometry as much as of mythology, a heaven for readers of stories and prognosticators of natural events, formed in an epoch in which a cordial agreement between science and imperial world-representation had begun to be worked out. It addresses itself to a mathematically or philosophically literate public that is still sufficiently mythologically and literarily educated enough to read the symbols of the constellations as if they were familiar episodes from Ovidian metamorphoses.

In this sense, one can say that the Farnese Atlas bears a literary heaven alongside the philosophical one, insofar as he deploys an old, familiar library of star sagas before the observer alongside the new, enigmatically clear, mathematical lines. On our picture, one can recognize in the center the primal Greek ship, the Argo, emblem of the Hellenic enterprising spirit and primary symbol of a thalassophile culture that was permeated by the consciousness that humans, so far as they as Greeks could conceive, are beings that always have something to seek on other shores. Here, the Argo is represented as a half-ship, because it emerges only halfway in the south of the winter sky, sinking once again at the beginning of the year. The ship is flanked on the right by centaurs, above whom Hydra and Crater can be recognized; on the left, it is flanked by the figure of Canis Major. With each of these pictures, there is connected a micro-universe of tales, thanks to which the events of the world are inscribed amongst images of scenic movement. If the sphaira as perfected figure readies the philosophical subduing of beings in a single sublime silhouette, the inscription of constellations bears witness to the memory of the primal dramas of life in their prototypical sequence. Aby Warburg has celebrated the constellated celestial globe as the true manifestation of Greek genius—as the human synthesis of mathematics and poetry (cited in Gombrich, 1997, pages 199–200).

In a second sense as well, upon reflective observation this sculpture can be recognized as an equally late and modern production. This Atlas is placed out of the time of the Titans into that of the athletes; its inner date is not the epoch of the Titanomachy, in which primal gods of forces and elements contended with younger gods of form and virtue for hegemony in the universe; he no longer stands at the border of the ecumene, by those Pillars of Hercules with which the early Greeks marked the end of the Mediterranean world. His place is in the middle of a stadium, particularly in a Roman



arena where professional fighters and athletes of violence, like second-order barbarians, staged their grandiose bodies in spectacular, bloody displays of force. The previously cited attempts at dating the work by various intellectual historians and historians of art who hold the work to be a Roman creation from the time of Augustus lend force to this claim. If the position of the vernal equinox on the globe is taken into account, an original sculpture from around 300 BCE would have to be assumed; the Roman discovery would then be a replica that inherited a superseded positioning of the stars from a Greek model. This, in turn, would suggest that the globe had lost its possible scientific function for its Roman users, serving only as a bit of educated loot or an imperial object of ostentation.

In fact, everything about the Farnese Atlas indicates that it was not taken up as an instrument of astronomic enlightenment by its Roman owners. Its deployment attests much more that it was perceived as a symbol for a new sort of existentialism of power. The muscular Titan buckles under his burden, as if he must not only hold up the firmament, but also pay tribute to a higher world of new lords (Schneider, 1986, pages 47f).<sup>(5)</sup> An Atlas who has to bear the heavens of the mathematicians belongs in the history of the world-picture on the side of an emperor who must take the globe into his personal care. It is not by chance that such figures appear in Rome at precisely that point in time at which the Romans were rehearsing their new imperial roll. In a moral sense, to physically bear the heavens means nothing other than to govern the world—a thought that Augustus had already found plausible. The consideration remains that ‘cosmos’ from Hellenistic times on is no longer only the title of the entirety of the heavens as an already ordered whole; the expression ‘cosmos’ now signifies the entirety of humanity or the ecumene—the cosmopolis, so far as this entered into the perspective of imperial interest and anthropological curiosity. The significance of Atlas’s roll thereby separates itself from a mythical forced labor, becoming a divine mission. Perhaps Horace already associated Atlas with the roll of Augustus as he lauds the emperor in his letter poem: “since you alone shoulder so many and great concerns.”<sup>(6)</sup>

To the extent that this concerns the archaic Atlas, it would have in fact seemed like a curse; his destiny was connected with that of his Titanic brother Prometheus, who, chained to a rock and tortured by the liver-eating vulture, could be called a ‘god-hated god’ with good grounds. He belongs to the group of the eternally suffering in Greek mythology: Tantalus, Sisyphus, Philoctetes, bound inseparably to their painful burdens. There is hardly anything of this early, tragic notion of Atlas in the Roman sculpture. The Farnese Atlas resembles an athlete of the state, marched into the circus to the cheering of the gallery, no less than a gladiator or a Hercules shimmering in oil, the heavy iron chain around his breast exploding with the force of his muscles. If the heavenly sphere weighs down heavily, this is in accord with the routine of the old circus-fighters, whose expertise is suffering. This strong man approaches his task as if in the entourage of a powerful patron supporting a gladiator troop; he has smelled imperial air and knows something of the celebrated pain of the hero in the arena. His face, blinded with exertion, overhears the ovations, as if afflicted by a powerful vision: give praise, citizens of Rome—the Titan, the son of Iapetus, is contending!

The groaning bearer of the heavens appears conscious of his roll in the political–cosmic theater of power. His body, optimized for exertion, bears witness to a culture that in the last instance talks about nothing but the duty to be strong in a world where there is neither relief for the powerful nor charity for the weak. We must imagine the idle gaze cast upon this form by the young Octavianus—later to become Augustus—to be

<sup>(5)</sup> I am grateful to Hans Belting for bringing this book to my attention.

<sup>(6)</sup> “Cum tot sustineas et tanta negotia solus” Epistulae II, I, I.

able to surmise the sorts of soliloquies that might have been delivered in the proximity of this statue. Nothing speaks against imagining those philosopher kings of the crisis-rocked 2nd century, Antonius Pius and his adoptive son, Marcus Aurelius, lingering before this image of the pain of slavery and mastery, meditating on the *conditio humana*. It can be held for certain that Hadrian, as he was having the dome of the Pantheon constructed, wanted to replicate *in grosso* the sphere on the shoulders of the Atlas, only this time without the mythological bearer, directly on the all-bearing soil of Rome. The nakedness of the sphere fighter plainly represents that of the deified emperor; the ritual athleticism of the figure articulates a philosophy of existence and service endemic to the court of the emperors. Its pathetic kneeling and stoic standing under the eternal burden reflects the ban on fatigue pronounced upon the life of the emperor. The bearer of the heavens testifies like the face of an emperor's mirror to the burdensome character of the eminent life that the gods placed at the center of the empire.

Still we must speak of a third relative modernity of the Farnese Atlas, and it is this one that is decisive as to its meaning. With reason, the figure has been called a demythologized or humanized giant (Fauser, 1967, pages 36–39, especially note 18); it could just as well be called an intellectualized world athlete, insofar as it approximates not only the appearance of the nude fighter, but equally the imago of the philosopher. If the suggestion of dating the statue to late Hellenistic or Augustan times is taken seriously, the hairstyle and beard of the Atlas acquires significance for its classification in the spectrum of Roman masculinity. Whatever the restorers might have added and improvised, through its beard—authentic in all probability—this world bearer makes claim to belonging to the intellectual field of his time. The custom of shaving was instituted during the Macedonian hegemony, maintained up to the 3rd century in all of Greece and carried over later to Rome. As a consequence, wearing a beard—at first an indication only of conservative, perhaps anti-Macedonian sympathies—became a distinctive mark of the philosophical class. The compulsory beard of the philosophers was so entrenched that, at the time of Marcus Aurelius, the Athenians hesitated to hire a Peripatetic with the best academic qualifications to a professorship endowed by the emperor, on the grounds that the candidate sported only a sparse beard. The case was held to be so difficult that the personal decision of the emperor in Rome was requested (Zanker, 1996, pages 110f). So far as the Farnese Atlas is concerned, he would have easily fulfilled this critical requirement for a teaching position—the abundance of his beard represented an unimpeachable testament to his philosophicality. Likewise, his mantle, hanging down to one side, whose presence for an ancient Titan is as baffling as it would be for an athlete, nude by profession, is testament to the appurtenance of this figure to the intellectual stratum.

In light of the unmistakable philosopher attributes of the beard and mantle, the burden borne by the Atlas appears in a different light. This world bearer, seen as a philosophizing athlete, has nothing to do with a material weight, but with thought of a nonphysical gravity. As the bearer of the mathematical sphere, the Atlas buckles beneath the weight of an obscure theorem. What stands before the eyes of an observer of the statue is nothing less than a logical charade whose wording becomes legible after decoding the symbols: the heaviest weight can be borne only by the greatest thought. From the toil of this burden, the massive corporeality of the Atlas elicits in us *per analogiam* a visible concept; in this representation of the totality of the cosmos there is no longer a massive body called 'the heavens' that must be lifted up with physical force alone. The true heaven is to be held in encompassing reflection. Its bearer or its 'pedestal' is thought itself. *Logos* has become an accomplice, even the proper *fundamentum* of that all-encompassing that surrounds us. The *periéchon* is spirit, whose lightness sets the all-massive afloat.

For this reason, the philosopher as Atlas knows something of the toil of those who seek the heights of corporeal capacity in the arena. Athletes, like philosophers, have a positive conception of the struggle that makes the man in the higher cultures, and both celebrate *pónos*—life-and-death-serious burden and character-building toil. But, where the athlete stops at the love of muscular effort or ponophilia, the philosopher goes further to the intellectual love of the most difficult, the whole. Thus, the Farnese Atlas raises to the level of a picture the fundamental doctrine of ancient philosophical asceticism with his feat of strength with the sphere: a philosopher is one who, as an athlete of totality, is laden with the weight of the world. The essence of philosophy as a form of living is philoponia—friendship with the entirety of weighty and worthy things. The love of wisdom and the love of the weight of the one whole are unified.<sup>(7)</sup>

In order to bear the great weight, one must cast aside the small ones. Only those who form themselves into athletes of impartiality shoulder the whole. Whoever grapples with small and middling causes will not have a free hand for the great ones. It is symptomatic that the emperor Marcus Aurelius, himself an authentic philosopher, found it fitting to note amongst the first sentences of his *Meditations*:

“My tutor taught me not to take sides in circus contests (Green or Blue, Light-Shield or Heavy), to love hard work, to limit my desires, to rely on myself, to keep my nose out of other people’s affairs, and to turn a deaf ear to gossip” (*Meditations* I,5).

The wages of such abstinence is the growing ability of the philosopher to contemplate the all-encompassing sphere that cannot possibly show itself to vulgar perception, lost in surrounding things. Only abstinent and consistent vigilance on all sides allows the all-real One Sphere to become perceptible to restrained witness. It is this sphere which, through the image of the mathematical heaven—that perfect curve which no empirical eye sees—is supplied its most adequate expression.

But, if the heaven borne by the Atlas is the sphere of the philosophers, the sensual perceptibility of this sublime globe must be a precarious matter. The statue does affect an unproblematic visibility of the globe, but reflection reveals that the reality of the globe in the pictorial display can only be elusory. What the Atlas bears on his shoulders is a symbol of the heavens whose true correspondent—if by chance it did physically exist—no human observer would ever be able to see from a mortal perspective. After all, *who* would you have to be in order to view the heavenly disk as an object opposite you? First of all, *where* would you have to stand to look upon the whole of existence like a cupula?

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<sup>(7)</sup> The verb *philoponein* and the substantive *philoponia* are already present in classical Greek; the philosophical praise for the exercising life, particularly in the stoa, could absolutely not have managed without this expression. Plato, as well, knew the ‘lovers of toils’, whom he names in the same breath as gymnasts and physicians (*Phaedrus* 248d). On the 6th century CE monophysite sect of the philoponoi see Wolff (1978, pages 107–713). The place of the love of toil in the self-characterizations of the powerful is shown in the ruling motto of Alexander the Great: *pónos kaí philanthropía*. Nietzsche’s philosophical genius expresses itself not least in the fact that he succeeds in the infamous §341 (‘The greatest weight’) of *The Gay Science* in formulating a radically new relation between *logos* and *pónos*: the acquiescence of thinkers to the thought of the eternal return.

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